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THE BLESSED DAMOZEL

 Reprinted from *The Germ*

THE BLESSED DAMOZEL BY
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI



Portland Maine
Thomas B Mosher
Mdccccv

HENRY MORSE STEPHENS

PREFACE



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“ LONE among the higher artists of his age, Mr. Rossetti has felt and given the mere physical charm of Christianity, with no admixture of doctrine or of doubt.

Here as in other things he belongs, if to any school at all, to that of the great Venetians. He takes the matter in hand with the thorough comprehension of Tintoretto or Veronese, with their thorough subjection of creed and history to the primary purpose of art and proper bearing of a picture. He works after the manner

of Titian painting his Assumption with an equal hand whether the girl exalted into goddess be Mary or Ariadne: but his instinct is too masterly for any confusion or discord of colours; and hence comes the spiritual charm and satisfaction of his sacred art. In this class of his poems the first place and the fairest palm belong to the 'Blessed Damsel.' This paradisaical poem, 'sweeter than honey or the honey-comb,' has found a somewhat further echo than any of its early fellows, and is perhaps known where little else is known of its author's. The sweet intense impression of it must rest for life upon all spirits that ever once received it into their depths, and hold it yet as a thing too dear and fair for praise or price. Itself the flower of a splendid youth, it has the special charm for youth of fresh first work and opening love; 'the dew of its birth is of the womb of the morning;' it has the odour and colour of

cloudless air, the splendour of an hour without spot. The divine admixtures of earth which humanize its heavenly passion have the flavour and bloom upon them of a maiden beauty, the fine force of a pure first sunrise. No poem shows more plainly the strength and wealth of the workman's lavish yet studious hand. One sample in witness of this wealth, and in evidence of the power of choice and persistent search after perfection which enhance its price, may be cited; though no petal should be plucked out of this mystic rose for proof of its fragrance. The two final lines of the stanza describing the secret shrine of God have been reformed; and the form first given to the world is too fair to be wholly forgotten:—

‘Whose lamps tremble continually
With prayer sent up to God;
And where each need, revealed, expects
Its patient period.’

Wonderful though the beauty may be of the new imagination, that the spirits standing there at length will see their 'old prayers, granted, melt each like a little cloud,' there is so sweet a force in the cancelled phrase that some students might grudge the loss, and feel that, though a diamond may have supplanted it, a ruby has been plucked out of the golden ring. Nevertheless, the complete circlet shines now with a more solid and flawless excellence of jewels and of setting. The sweetness and pathos and gracious radiance of the poem have been praised by those who have not known or noted all the noble care spent on it in rejection and rearrangement of whatever was crude or lax in the first cast; but the breadth and sublimity which ennoble its brightness and beauty of fancies are yet worthier of note than these. What higher imagination can be found in modern verse than this?

‘From the fixed place of Heaven she saw
Time, like a pulse, shake fierce
Through all the worlds.’

This grandeur of scale and sweep of spirit give greatness of style to poetry, as well as sweetness and brightness. These qualities, together with the charm of fluent force and facile power, are apparent in all Mr. Rossetti's work; but its height of pitch and width of scope give them weight and price beyond their own.”∴.

∴. See *Essays and Studies*. By Algernon Charles Swinburne. Crown 8vo. London, 1875. Pp. 82-84. The essay on Rossetti was first printed in *The Fortnightly Review* for May, 1870.



UCH was the splendid tribute rendered by one great poet to another at a period when contemporary criticism was singularly barren of results. It came when most needed by Rossetti, and to this day remains unapproached by any later appraiser of literary values. The concurrent approval expressed by William Morris though less fervid in phrase is no less satisfying in its absolute sincerity. ∴

∴ “A poem in which wild longing, and the shame of life, and despair of separation, and the worship of love, are wrought into a palpable dream, in which the heaven that exists as if for the sake of the beloved is as real as the earthly things about the lover, while these are scarcely less strange or less pervaded with a sense of his

For Mr. William Sharp, ∴ who originally suggested the plan here adopted of printing entire the textual variants of *The Blessed Damozel*, it doubtless suffices that Mr. Swinburne has recently and still more generally advocated the same idea — has indeed made it a labour of love binding upon any future editor who would do honour to his text. ∴

passion, than the things his imagination has made.” (*The Academy*, May 14, 1870.)

∴ Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *A Record and a Study*. By William Sharp. 8vo. London, 1882. Pp. 335-340. By textual variants is meant verbal alterations only. To have given Rossetti's changes in punctuation, or similar minutiae, would not have contributed in the remotest degree to our knowledge or enjoyment of the poem.

∴ “My illustrious friend Mr. Swinburne wrote to me some while ago that a better ser-

The origin of the poem is happily placed beyond conjecture. To Mr. Hall Caine we owe the publication of a verbal statement made to him by Rossetti in the autumn of 1881 upon the occasion of the latter reciting Poe's *Ulalume* and *The Raven*:

"I remember that, touching the last-mentioned vice to the memory of my brother as a poet could hardly be rendered than to print the variants in the successive published forms of his several poems; for (as he said), while the changes introduced were almost invariably for the better, the older readings were often, from the point of view which had prompted them, so felicitous that few persons except Dante Rossetti (with his insatiable passion for the best) would have had the heart to sacrifice them." (W. M. Rossetti: *Introduction to the Blessed Damozel with Decorations* by W. B. Macdougall. 4to. London, 1898. P. xiv.)

of these poems, he remarked that out of his love for it while still a boy his own Blessed Damozel originated. 'I saw' he said, 'that Poe had done the utmost it was possible to do with the grief of the lover on earth, and so I determined to reverse the conditions, and give utterance to the yearning of the loved in heaven.'” ∴

Bearing in mind that The Raven was first published in the New York Evening Mirror for January 29th 1845, the following statement by Mr. W. M. Rossetti may be taken as conclusive :

“He wrote The Blessed Damozel early in 1847 (if not indeed in 1846), . . . ‘in a kind of Gothic manner,’ and included it with other poems under the general title Songs of the Art Catholic. Of the first form of the composition, that which appeared in the family magazine

∴ *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.*
By T. Hall Caine. 8vo. London, 1882.
P. 284.

towards 1847, no trace remains, so far as my knowledge extends. ∴ The second form is that which was printed in *The Germ*. . . . Before publishing the poem in *The Germ*, my brother added four stanzas to it. . . . I think it not unlikely that they may have been stanzas 6, 9, 13 and either 14 or 17."

This, in brief, is the history of *The Blessed Damozel* as a poem. From an artistic standpoint the subject did not immediately attract Rossetti's attention. His first picture in oils was undertaken at the suggestion of Mr. William Graham, (1873-1877). It was painted life size with predella, and is the one more generally known. A second painting, (1879), for Mr. F. R. Leyland is similar but not identical and does not seem to have been reproduced. Four crayon portraits of the principal figure exist, all of them studies from the same model. The

∴ Nor can the original manuscript be traced.

one here given as frontispiece is from the picture executed in 1874 for Lord Mount-Temple, but incorrectly named Sancta Liliás.

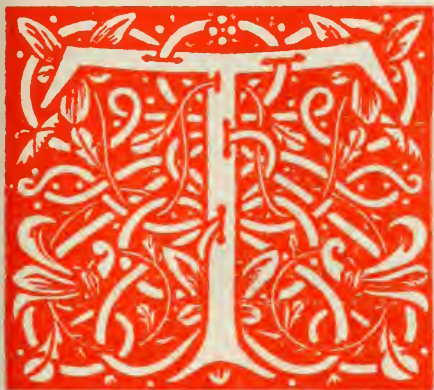
Next to that youthful head "beloved of Leonardo" "which Love chooses for its own," may we not place this later and even lovelier presentment of Alexa Wilding, whose glorious beauty thus transfigured became in Rossetti's solemn trance and vision the Blessed Damozel we know and worship evermore?

"Lo! it is done. Above the enthroning throat
The mouth's mould testifies of voice and kiss,
The shadowed eyes remember and foresee.
Her face is made her shrine. Let all men note
That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)
They that would look on her must come to me."

THE BLESSED DAMOZEL BY
DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI

A Reprint of the original text taken
from *The Germ*, mdcccl, including all
variants from *The Oxford and Cam-*
bridge Magazine, mdccclvi; *Poems*,
mdccclxx, and the *Collected Works*,
mdccclxxxvi.

TO MISS
ANNE L. L.



HE BLESSED
DAMOZEL
LEANED OUT

From the gold bar
of Heaven :

Her blue grave eyes
were deeper much
Than a deep water,

She had three lilies in her hand, [even.
And the stars in her hair were seven.

1856 :

Her eyes knew more of rest and shade
Than waters still'd at even ;

1870 : 1886 :

Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even ;

II

Her robe, ungirt from clasp to hem,
No wrought flowers did adorn,
But a white rose of Mary's gift
On the neck meetly worn;
And her hair, lying down her back,
Was yellow like ripe corn.

1856: 1870: 1886:

For service meetly worn;

1870: 1886:

Her hair that lay along her back

III

Herseemed she scarce had been a day
One of God's choristers;
The wonder was not yet quite gone
From that still look of her's;
Albeit to them she left, her day
Had counted as ten years.

IV



O ONE it is ten
years of years :
. . . Yet now,
here in this place,
Surely she leaned o'er
me, — her hair
Fell all about my
face. . . .

Nothing: the Autumn-fall of leaves.
The whole year sets apace.)

1856: 1870: 1886:

. . . Yet now, and in this place,



T WAS the terrace
of God's house
That she was
standing on, —
By God built over
the sheer depth
In which Space is
begun ;

So high, that looking downward thence,
She could scarce see the sun.

1856 : 1870 : 1886 :

It was the rampart of God's house
The which is Space begun ;
She scarce could see the sun.

VI

✻ It lies from Heaven across the flood
Of ether, as a bridge.
Beneath, the tides of day and night
With flame and blackness ridge
The void, as low as where this earth
Spins like a fretful midge.

1856: 1870: 1886:

It lies in Heaven, across the flood

1870: 1886:

With flame and darkness ridge

VII

But in those tracts, with her, it was
The peace of utter light
And silence. For no breeze may stir
Along the steady flight
Of seraphim; no echo there,
Beyond all depth or height.

This stanza is not in the later editions.

VIII

✻ Heard hardly, some of her new friends,
Playing at holy games,
Spake, gentle-mouthed, among themselves,
Their virginal chaste names ;
And the souls, mounting up to God,
Went by her like thin flames.

1856 :

She scarcely heard her sweet new friends :
Softly they spake among themselves

1870 :

Amid their loving games
Spake evermore among themselves

1886 :

Around her, lovers, newly met
'Mid deathless love's acclaims,
Spoke evermore among themselves
Their heart-remembered names ;

IX

And still she bowed herself, and stooped
Into the vast waste calm;
Till her bosom's pressure must have made
The bar she leaned on warm,
And the lilies lay as if asleep
Along her bended arm.

1856:

And still she bow'd above the vast
Waste sea of worlds that swarm;

1856: 1870: 1886:

Until her bosom must have made

1870: 1886:

Out of the circling charm;

X

From the fixt lull of heaven, she saw
Time, like a pulse, shake fierce
Through all the worlds. Her gaze still strove,
In that steep gulph, to pierce
The swarm: and then she spake, as when
The stars sang in their spheres.

1856: 1870: 1886:

From the fix'd place of Heaven, she saw
Within the gulf to pierce
Its path; and now she spoke, as when
1856:

The stars sung in their spheres.

[X

 The sun was gone now. The curl'd moon
Was like a little feather
Fluttering far down the gulf. And now
She spoke through the still weather.
Her voice was like the voice the stars
Had when they sung together.]

Between stanzas X and XI this stanza was
introduced in the 1856 text, and retained, with
slight changes in punctuation, in the 1870 and
1886 versions.

1870: 1886:

Had when they sang together.

[XI]

☙ (Ah sweet! Even now, in that bird's song,
Strove not her accents there,
Fain to be hearkened? When those bells
Possessed the mid-day air,
Strove not her steps to reach my side
Down all the echoing stair?)]

In 1870 this stanza was included as XI. It first appeared in the 1856 text as XVI, with these variations:

Ah sweet! Just now, in that bird song,
Was she not stepping to my side
Down all the trembling stair?



WISH that he were
come to me,
For he will come,"
she said.

"Have I not prayed
in solemn heaven?
On earth, has he not
prayed?

Are not two prayers a perfect strength?
And shall I feel afraid?

1856: 1870: 1886:

Have I not pray'd in Heaven? — on earth,
Lord, Lord, has he not pray'd?

XII

☛ "When round his head the aureole clings,
And he is clothed in white,
I'll take his hand, and go with him
To the deep wells of light,
And we will step down as to a stream
And bathe there in God's sight.

1870:

We will step down as to a stream,

1886:

As unto a stream we will step down,

XIII

 "We two will stand beside that shrine,
Occult, withheld, untrod,
Whose lamps tremble continually
With prayer sent up to God ;
And where each need, revealed, expects
Its patient period.

1856 :

With prayers sent up to God ;

1856 : 1870 : 1886 :

Whose lamps are stirr'd continually
And see our old prayers, granted, melt
Each like a little cloud.

XIV

 "We two will lie i' the shadow of
That living mystic tree
Within whose secret growth the Dove
Sometimes is felt to be,
While every leaf that His plumes touch
Saith His name audibly.

1856: 1870: 1886:
Is sometimes felt to be,

XV

☛ “And I myself will teach to him —
I myself, lying so, —
The songs I sing here ; which his mouth
Shall pause in, hushed and slow,
Finding some knowledge at each pause
And some new thing to know.”

1856 : 1870 : 1886 :

The songs I sing here ; which his voice
And find some knowledge at each pause,
Or some new thing to know.

XVI



LAS! to her wise
simple mind
These things were all
but known
Before : they trembled
on her sense, —
Her voice had caught
their tone.

Alas for lonely Heaven ! Alas
For life wrung out alone !

In the texts of 1870 and 1886, for these two
parenthetical stanzas, XVI and XVII, a single
one was substituted :

XVII

 Alas, and though the end were reached? . . .
Was thy part understood
Or borne in trust? And for her sake
Shall this too be found good?—
May the close lips that knew not prayer
Praise ever, though they would?)

1870: 1886:

(Alas! We two, we two, thou say'st!
Yea, one wast thou with me
That once of old. But shall God lift
To endless unity
The soul whose likeness with thy soul
Was but its love for thee?)

XVIII

“



E TWO,” she
said, “will seek the
groves
Where the lady
Mary is,
With her five
handmaidens,
whose names

Are five sweet symphonies : —
Cecily, Gertrude, Magdalen,
Margaret and Rosalys.

XIX

☛ "Circle-wise sit they, with bound locks
And bosoms covered ;
Into the fine cloth, white like flame,
Weaving the golden thread,
To fashion the birth-robcs for them
Who are just born, being dead.

1856 : 1870 : 1886 :
And foreheads garlanded ;

XX

☛ "He shall fear haply, and be dumb.
Then I will lay my cheek
To his, and tell about our love,
Not once abashed or weak :
And the dear Mother will approve
My pride, and let me speak.

XXI

☛ "Herself shall bring us, hand in hand,
To Him round whom all souls
Kneel — the unnumber'd solemn heads
Bowed with their aureoles :
And Angels, meeting us, shall sing
To their citherns and citoles.

1856 :

Kneel, the unnumber'd ransom'd heads

1870 : 1886 :

Kneel, the clear-ranged unnumbered heads

XXII

✻ "There will I ask of Christ the Lord
Thus much for him and me : —
To have more blessing than on earth
In nowise ; but to be
As then we were, — being as then
At peace. Yea, verily.

1856 : 1870 : 1886 :

Only to live as once on earth

1856 :

At peace — only to be

1870 : 1886 :

With Love, — only to be,

1856 : 1870 : 1886 :

As then awhile, for ever now

Together, I and he.

XXIII

☛ "Yea, verily; when he is come
We will do thus and thus :
Till this my vigil seem quite strange
And almost fabulous ;
We two will live at once, one life ;
And peace shall be with us."

This stanza was cancelled in the later texts.

XXIV



HE gazed, and listened,
and then said,
Less sad of speech than
mild ;

“All this is when he
comes.” She ceased :
The light thrilled past
her, filled

With Angels, in strong level lapse.
Her eyes prayed, and she smiled.

1870 : 1886 :

The light thrilled towards her, fill'd
With angels in strong level flight.

XXV

 (I saw her smile.) But soon their flight
Was vague 'mid the poised spheres.
And then she cast her arms along
The golden barriers,
And laid her face between her hands,
And wept. (I heard her tears.)

1870: 1886:

(I saw her smile.) But soon their path

1856: 1870: 1886:

Was vague in distant spheres;

1856:

And then she laid her arms along

NOTES

I



TANZA viii gave Rossetti much trouble. In one or more reissues of the mdccclxx volume of Poems, lines ii and iv have additional variants as follows:

In joy no sorrow claims,
Their rapturous new names;

A microscopic examination of these intermediate editions before the Collected Works were finally put forth by Mr. W. M. Rossetti (mdccclxxxvi) might reveal still further minor changes. It is evident that improvement was impossible. The poem had already crystallized into perfect speech. Beyond this not even Rossetti could go.

II

“The final verse was to the last a thorn of indecision to the author, he never quite agreeing as to whether “she cast her arms along the golden barriers,” or “she laid her arms, etc.,” was the better, ultimately choosing, ere the proofs were returned, the earlier reading. Also in this verse he thought of altering in the 1881 edition the last four words, “I heard her tears” to “I felt her tears,” but refrained on the ground that where there might be an apparent realistic gain there was spiritual loss.” —William Sharp.

Here ends The Blessed Damozel a faithful reprint of the poem by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as it originally appeared in The Germ for February mdcccl, together with the textual variants taken from The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine mdccclvi, the Poems of mdccclxx, and the final version in the Collected Works of mdccclxxxvi.

Of this third edition Four hundred and fifty copies have been printed on Kelmscott hand-made paper, and the type distributed.

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Mdccccc.

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